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Rural Library Professionals as Change Agents in the 21st Century:
Integrating Information Technology Competencies in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region (*ITRL*)

ABSTRACT

"Rural Library Professionals as Change Agents in the 21st century: Integrating Information Technology Competencies in Southern and Central Appalachian Region" (*ITRL*) at the University of Tennessee (UT), School of Information Sciences (SIS) meets an urgent need for rural librarians in the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region with information technology (IT) competencies in a novel program that combines work experience/practice in regional library systems with graduate instruction/curriculum support. This region is experiencing information poverty and unemployment, economic challenges, low levels of information literacy and educational attainment, a lack of access/use of IT, and unique environmental challenges. Library professionals who are embedded in their communities are in a strong position to help address and develop solutions to these needs. The goal of *ITRL* is to recruit fifteen students who have paraprofessional jobs in the SCA region's rural libraries to complete their master's degree with a focus on IT and rural librarianship in the SIS program via distance. Students will receive a structured, individually-tailored curriculum with formal/informal professional mentoring by educators and practitioners. IT competencies in developing rural library work applications/practices especially tailored towards the needs of the SCA communities will be incorporated into the curriculum. If funded, *ITRL* will begin October 1, 2009 and will be completed by September 30, 2012.

The overall project design covers five phases that include: recruitment of *ITRL* students from rural libraries in the SCA region, needs assessment of library services and information challenges faced by rural regional libraries, implementation of educational/training activities, mentoring, evaluation/assessment of program outcomes, and dissemination of program results/experiences. Two major components in the curriculum will include IT and rural librarianship courses. IT deliverables applied towards rural libraries in the SIS courses will include:

- Technology infrastructure planning, assessment, and analysis of library automation systems;
- Web design, development, and usability;
- Database design and implementation;
- Building digital library and web portals ;
- Establishing hardware and software configurations for networking systems;
- Creating Library 2.0 tools.

Management outcomes in rural library courses will include:

- Service evaluation/assessment in rural libraries;
- Planning/management of a rural library program for children (or young adults) and adults;
- Reader's advisory and fiction/non-fiction genre;
- Grant writing and development.

UT-SIS' Dr. Bharat Mehra will administer the project with Dr. Kimberly Black and Dr. Vandana Singh. The three partnering institutions are: Clinch-Powell Regional Library (Clinton, Tennessee), Sevier County Public Library System (Sevierville, Tennessee), and the Watauga Regional Library (Johnson City, Tennessee). Project partners have been selected to participate in *ITRL* based on their leadership, role, knowledge, networks, experience, and interests to participate in promoting IT-based development and change in the SCA libraries and their communities. Though all project partners are located in the East Tennessee region, representatives from other regional and county library systems in the SCA region will be contacted to elicit their participation in the various activities identified in the grant proposal. Project partners will assist in recruitment of *ITRL* students via participating in the ***ITRL Recruitment Board***; participation/recruitment for the online ***ITRL Needs Assessment Symposium***; participation/recruitment for the ***ITRL Practitioner Mentoring Board***; and participation/recruitment for the ***Annual ITRL Summits***. The model of a master's degree in information science to prepare future rural library professionals (who are already working paraprofessionals) with IT competencies and skill-sets that integrate coursework geared towards producing tangible outcomes and products relevant for rural communities in the SCA region will be of interest and applicability to master's programs nationwide.